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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the problems and successes of adult working-class women at Staten Island Community College (New York) who have been moved by the aspirations enunciated by the women's movement to enter the college in increasing numbers. Among the problems that such reentering women face in the pursuit of a higher education are ambivalence and resistance from husbands, guilt feelings as a consequence of having to leave their children for extended periods, lack of institutional sensitivity to the unique needs of returning women, academic sexual stereotyping, and lack of sensitivity of male faculty members. In addition, the recent imposition of tuition charges in the City University of New York system poses an obstacle to program completion for working-class women, who typically have no income independent of their spouses. The severe reduction of counseling and support personnel throughout the City University also impinges negatively on working-class women, who have special needs for counseling designed to encourage them. Response of the institution to the special needs of returning working-class women has been inadequate thus far. Improved levels of counseling are needed, both for the woman student, and in some instances, members of her family, as are career advocacy and vocational advocacy. It is notable that some women students have taken to political organizing to obtain needed educational opportunities. (JDS)

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Meeting the Needs of Working Class Women in Post-Secondary Education

by

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Staten Island Community College,* in its twenty years of existence, has served as a port of academic entry for the third and fourth generation-American young people of the borough. Since 1970, Open Admissions, a policy no longer, unfortunately, in effect at City University, has drawn women of the Staten Island community who have been moved by the aspirations enunciated by the women's movement to enter the college in significant and increasing numbers. The new generation of college students on our campus is, in effect, the second generation-Americans, the children of immigrants.

These reentering women are emerging from a tradition that placed a priority on home and family in the life of a woman. They are in their mid-twenties to their mid-forties, with young children and/or children who are grown. They are mainly from working class families; they are Irish-, Italian-, or Polish-Catholic--the recently recognized, recently romanticized ethnic Americans. They have been influenced by a combination of traditions that has not placed great value on higher education for women. They graduated from high school, worked, married, had children, and are now continuing their education because, as one of them wrote, "I now realize there's more to life than my family and my home." They came to this college with a heritage of diffidence; they were filled with anxiety about their course work. "Do I have the ability?" "Do I have the discipline?" "Can I keep up with the younger generation?" they queried themselves.

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*By action of the Board of Higher Education of the City of New York, Staten Island Community College has been federated with Richmond College into a new insitution called The College of Staten Island. Throughout this paper, Staten Island Community College shall refer to the community college in existence prior to September 1, 1976.

But they were fortunate in that Staten Island Community College included in its faculty a significant number of women teachers and counselors who identify with their needs; indeed, they share in many ways the life situation of these women. Because of this support, but especially because of their high motivation, many of the reentering women students are performing well academically.

The achievements of the women are particularly impressive in view of the obstacles that confront them. Those with young children are torn with guilt about leaving them in order to go to college. Often their husbands regard assisting their wives with housework as unmanly. Nor do the women feel at ease about asking men to step out of their traditional roles. The dilemma was stated by one woman who wrote, "Although I've hinted that help would be appreciated, my husband still does not help. The children depend on me to help them with their homework and weekly religious instruction. I get very discouraged because I feel my efforts in attending college are in vain. However, I'm determined to continue my education and obtain a degree no matter how long it takes."

The women are now thinking beyond the attainment of a degree to the career which will follow. Some of the women entered college with a career goal--often teaching; others came with a general "thirst for knowledge." Some of those with expressed career goals are no reevaluating them because of the tight job market in teaching and related careers, and because their expreience in the college has led them to consider other career

options. Those who entered without a clearly formulated aim are now attempting to establish one for themselves: "I work better," wrote one woman, "when I have a goal to work for."

The faculty women who are close to these students are aware that certain more subtle, less easily expressed pressures bear on the vocational aspirations of the adult women students. The women students at The College of Staten Island are married to firemen, policemen, civil service workers. The blue collar ethic has always emphasized rigidly defined sex roles and the principle that the male is the primary. if not the only, breadwinner in the family. The husbands are fearful that their wives may become independent, even "move ahead" of them; but because the blue collar ethic demands that men be stoic, they do not openly express their anxiety. We have found evidence that the men are heavily penalized for the stress their code of behavior imposes on them.

Earlier this year, the Institute for Research and Development in Occupational Education of the City University of New York sponsored a program to bring adult women into the college. The program was designed to accommodate 100 women and over 200 responded. The profile we have drawn emerged from questionnaires submitted to 39 of these women, of whom 24 responded. The responses on the questionnaires indicated that many of the women in this group had gone to work right after high school because their fathers were dead or in poor health. Discussions with other adult women confirm the early death of the male parent as a factor in the family histories of many of these women. Several of the women in the group are married to men who are in poor health; a small number are already widowed; consciously or subconsciously, the

reentering women students are connecting career goals to a time when they may have to support their families.

Whatever variables might be operative elsewhere, the women who have been coming to Staten Island Community College are similar in their socialization to reentering women across the country. They are probably typical, as well, in having turned to the community college as the most accessible, least intimidating institution of post-secondary education. However, Staten Island Community College has been typical of other community colleges in that it was not designed to meed the vocational and curricular needs of these students. Much of the original impetus for the establishment of the community colleges after World War II was related to the recognized need to meet the vocational goals of returning veterans. In the nearly three decades of rapid growth since that time, the student population has been primarily male, and the career programs and curricula have been and continue to be directed toward male interests. Moreover, the focus in the community colleges has been on the late adolescent male student, even though, because of the substantial number of adult part-time students in the evening sessions, those under twenty-one are actually a minority in the community colleges.[1] The career programs for male students have led to better paying jobs than the career programs for women; male students have consistently aspired to a higher level of education than women students.[2]

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[1]Charles C. Collins, "Student Characteristics and Their Implication for Student Personnel Work" in Student Development Programs in the Community Junior College, ed. Terry O'Bannion and Alice Thurston (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.:Prentice, 1972), pp.23-24.

[2]David S. Bushnell, Organizing for Change: New Priorities for Community Colleges (New York: McGraw, 1973), p. 16.

This nationwide trend was born out at Staten Island Community College where the enrollment figures for Spring, 1976 revealed that there were 851 male students and 804 female students in the career programs. However, the breakdown of these figures demonstrated sexual stereotyping in the vocational curricula. To cite a few examples, there were 118 women to 18 men in the child care program; 110 women to 68 men in the medical laboratory technology program; and 357 women to 70 men in the nursing program. However, in the electrical technology, mechanical technology, and computer technology programs, the ratios of men to women were 175:2; 51:1; and 70:12 respectively.

Another fact of institutional life is related to the two-tier system at City University. Faculty at the senior colleges, particularly the older senior colleges, have, along with the rest of academia, traditionally held faculty in applied sciences, technologies, and career programs in low esteem.[3] However, within the community colleges, and this true of Staten Island, the faculties have adopted the hierarchical values associated with traditional academic respectability.[4] At Staten Island Community College, seniority is vested in the technologies and the math and science departments which service them. In these departments, the faculties are entirely or predominantly male. Women faculty teach in the women's career programs, in the liberal arts service departments, and in the remedial programs.

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[3]Everett Carll Ladd, Jr. and Seymour Martin Lipset, The Divided Academy: Professors and Politics (New York: McGraw, 1975), p. 262.

[4]Robert Palinchak, The Evolution of the Community College (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1973), p. 212.

During the previous administration at Staten Island Community College, there was a concerted effort to increase the flexibility of the institution through the establishment of experimental programs, staffed with faculty possessing other than traditional credentials, such as union organizing, and designed to meet the needs of non-traditional students. However, because of the budget crisis, many of these programs have been eliminated or severely cut. And now, with the federation of Staten Island Community College and Richmond College, the emerging institution appears to be focussing on the image of City College in the 50's--initiating, for example, a new program which is designed to attract the academically well-prepared students who might have, in earlier, more affluent times competed for scholarships at Harvard and Yale.

A second new program is designed to attract working people who desire to maintain full-time employment while getting their degrees in two years. Under this program, a student would attend college from Friday night through Sunday every weekend during the school year.

This plan appears to us to show a lack of realistic thinking; the college is currently being redefined while its Open Admissions mission is degraded through the dismissal of counselors and faculty. It is unlikely that working people, with or without families would feel mentally or physically able to give up every weekend in order to attain a degree that might have no market value by the time it was awarded.

The community colleges have traditionally attracted

students who, because of work and family responsibilities, are most in need of a supportive environment and flexible arrangements. However, they have often found inflexibility and impersonality.[5] When Open Admissions was established at City University, younger, more progressive faculty came into the community colleges. They were teachers with a sense of educational mission, supportive of and responsive to the "New Student" as defined by K. Patricia Cross. However, because of retrenchments, most of these teachers are gone from City University.

This is particularly ironic in view of the projection made in Project Focus, a nationwide study of community colleges, published in 1973, that there is strong prospect for growth in the community colleges through 1980, and that the older, non-traditional student will be responsible for that growth.[6] The College of Staten Island is in the midst of a major transformation in post-secondary education and remains, as an institution, uncognizant of and unresponsive to that fact. Older students, especially reentering women, are the growth market in student populations on Staten Island. Often, these are the women who, after World War II, were encouraged to stay home and out of the job market. Now they are coming to college, determined to get what they missed when they were younger, but there is no institutional planning to meet their needs.

Apart from financial assistance to meet the cost of education, we have come to recognize that the three basic

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[5]Edmund J. Gleazer, Jr., Project Focus: A Forecast Study of Community Colleges (New York: McGraw, 1973), p. 42.

[6]Bushnell, p. 116.

needs of the reentering women students are for counseling, for solid career options, and for the recognition of the transferability of life skills.

The women are confused by the institution and feel a lack of support. "I want to know where to go and whom to see about my problems," one woman commented. There are no counselors whose sole function it is to deal with the specific problems of the adult female student. The institution has not sensitized itself to these students in the same way it sensitized itself to meet the needs of the younger Open Admissions students--often the sons and daughters of these students--in the early Seventies. Although faculty members regularly express their satisfaction in teaching the more responsive older students, there is no uniform recognition of the adult students as a population with special needs.

For many of the women, attending college is a form of deviation from the life style of their community. Staten Island is an intensely traditional community and there is an intense involvement with housecleaning. Having decided that they want more from life than floors free from wax build-up, soap operas, and coffee clotches, the women often find themselves isolated from their neighbors and friends.

Husbands are sometimes supportive, but more often they are skeptical about their wives' decision to continue their education. "My husband says all the right things, but . . . " was one respondent's representation of the pressure placed upon her by her ambivalent husband.

Because of these factors, it seems to us that an extensive counseling service should be established that would include the entire family unit. Husbands and, on occasion, children should be counseled together with the women students. The aim of the extensive counseling then, would be to harmonize and strengthen the family, while, at the same time, reconciling family members to the emerging aspirations of the adult women. The husbands would be encluraged to recognize and deal with their resentment and anxiety (and the possible consequences of their resentment and anxiety), to become supportive of their wives, and to reexamine their own career goals.

Another principal need is for career advocacy on the part of the institution. Recently, for example, one of us served as an advocate for one of our students with the administration of a private college to which she wished to transfer. The college has a highly regarded home economics program, but she felt the college's requirement that she take the Standard Aptitude Test was too great an obstacle as she, like many women with math anxiety, believed that she could not pass that portion of the test. We know that there are many students with similar problems, and the ad hoc assistance she received should have been a matter of course in a regular counseling service in our, or any similar, institution.

Vocational advocacy should also include negotiation with private industry in the area, exploring and developing opportunities for new careers for women, and establishing, where possible, internship programs. Information concerning occupational forecasts, or Department of Labor studies should also be disseminated to faculty,

administrators, and students, and then used in the redirection of old programs and the creation of new ones.

What is also implicit in the above recommendation is that the adult women students need women administrators and faculty members to serve as supportive role models. The women's studies courses which are enormously popular with the women students are increasingly, in this era of budget crisis, being regarded with suspicion by most members of the faculty outside the humanities and many within the humanities. The respondents to our questionnaires have cited such courses as one of their major needs, along with vocational guidance and counseling. One of the students in this group became interested, as a result of raised consciousness, in making a study of the career programs that serve primarily male students in our college. Her ultimate goal, of course, was to change the status quo. Such studies as this one, involving students and staff, could lead to the development of programs and courses related to the vocational needs of these students.

Lack of adaptability, the inability to take risks, and lack of tolerance for ambiguity are serious handicaps for the adult woman in a career situation. It is our belief that the women students we are dealing with are in need of learning experiences that will promote the recognition that there are informal as well as formal channels for problem-solving, and that will develop their ability to accommodate with ease to change in situations. Our aspiration for these students is that they will envision career goals that they had not previously considered, including the option of enterpreneurship, a hitherto unthought of goal for

working class women. Above all, our hope is that these students will enter the work force with increased self-awareness, confidence, and renewed skills.

Something should be said here about the methods by which these goals will be achieved.

During the late spring of 1976, when the imposition of tuition at City University of New York was imminent, women students at Staten Island Community College came together to find some way of dealing with the crisis tuition payments would cause in their family finances. A group of students and supportive faculty continued to meet together over the summer They contacted local politicians and representatives of organizations such as the League of Women Voters. They have become effective lobbyists--they are currently planning a trip to Albany--and as a result of their efforts, the state senator in their district is prepared to sponsor legislation permitting a woman to declare her income as only half her husband's, rather than the whole of it, and thus increase her eligibility for tuition assistance. It is our expectation that political activities in their own self-interest will lead these women to acquire self-confidence and abandon their heritage of diffidence. The institution remains unresponsive to the needs of the women. "They just want us to go home and keep on washing dishes," one of the students observed of the indifferent and unsupportive male faculty. But it is our expectation that the women will shortly come to recognize that they are now, because of the end of free tuition at

City University, educational consumers. As they have learned to compare one supermarket with another in order to get the best value for their food dollars, they will recognize that they have an interest in getting the fullest value for their educational tax dollars and their educational purchasing dollars. Other educational institutions--as they will no doubt soon realize--will respond to them if the College of Staten Island will not. The recognition of educational options will, we are certain, lead to an interesting period of negotiation between the administration and this group--known as Women for Education--who are determined to get, as one of their leading activists has declared, "What we want and what we need."

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